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# Precious

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Rochester Institute of Technology

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of  
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences  
In Candidacy for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

Precious

by Amy O'Shaughnessy

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## Introduction



Last fall, I was anxious over the approach of winter with its characteristic short days and numbing cold. I spent as much time outdoors as possible, taking long walks to savor the temperate weather and collecting whatever I found interesting. The work I created when I returned to the studio reflected my desire to preserve the vitality of nature and to immortalize it for others to experience.

Walking in the woods calmed me, and I reexamined objects I would have ordinarily passed by. The iridescence on the inside of milkweed pods as well as the craggy quality of mushrooms appealed to me and into my collection bag they went. I became focused on my fascination with the sublime and realized that perhaps people do not examine the subtleties of the landscape, and they may bypass beauty in unexpected places. I decided to use the beauty of glass to reflect the preciousness and beauty found in nature.

I focused on plants because I am drawn to the simultaneous simplicity and complexity of their form and function. I became more interested in seedpods as my investigations continued and I started to think about the different ways plants protect seeds. I explored different forms and shapes of pods, and the relationship between the inner lining and the outer shell.

## Influences

I am inspired by the work of Ansel Adams and Andy Goldsworthy because we share some of the same goals. Both artists challenge the viewer's familiarity with nature while capturing its sublimity. They also address the relationship between nature and time, either by freezing a moment or implying its passage.

I challenged the viewer's familiarity with nature by using materials not generally recognized for their beauty for the purpose of creating subtle and beautiful textures.

Also, I addressed the notion of time in my work. Like Ansel Adams who photographed nature in order to seize its beauty and hold it at a standstill in time, I preserved natural things that I found beautiful in an attempt to prevent time from changing them.

Adams photographs immortalized scenic parts of western United States, especially national parks. He brought the breathtaking landscape to the viewer. I wanted to bring nature to the viewer by incorporating it into my work and into the gallery setting.

The atmosphere in the photograph *Leaves, Mount Rainier National Park* is otherworldly. The camera is pointed down at the forest floor as if the viewer is looking down at the ground while walking. Focused upon a particular fern, whose metallic leaves are covered with glassy dewdrops, the



Leaves, Mount Rainier National Park, Washington, c. 1942



print is meditative and serene. Adams' captured the quiet beauty of the plants at our feet. I used the same silvery haziness of glass in many of my pieces to create a similar ephemeral effect. I also made most of the pedestals in the exhibition lower than eye level, so that the viewer would look down upon the pieces.

Andy Goldsworthy creates simple forms and patterns out of organic materials and allows the elements to participate in the process. The beauty of his work is in the manner he manipulates leaves, sticks, rocks, and mud. His sensitivity and understanding for the cycles of life and death are an underlying presence in many of his works.

Goldsworthy himself states,

Each work grows, stays, decays- integral parts of a cycle which the photograph shows at its height, marking the moment when the work is most alive. Process and decay are implicit.<sup>1</sup>

I admired this acceptance of the workings of nature and the tension that it creates in his sculptures. The precarious position of a balanced rock or the careful configurations of leaves laid in an intricate pattern taunt the possibility of a strong wind. I struggled with issues of preservation and decay, and I am still not sure if I can embrace these natural processes in relation to my own work.





Leaves  
polished, creased  
made in the shadow of the tree from which they fell  
pinned to the ground with thorns

LE JARDIN MASSEY, TARBES, FRANCE  
22 AUGUST 1989





Rowan leaves laid around hole  
collecting the last few leaves  
nearly finished  
dog ran into hole  
started again  
made in the shade on a windy, sunny day

YORKSHIRE SCULPTURE PARK, WEST BRETTON  
25 OCTOBER 1987



Goldsworthy transcended this dilemma and focused upon using it as a tool for learning about nature and himself.

The complexity of his work and apparent fragility of his media also imply the amount of time and patience involved its creation. I appreciate the quality of craftsmanship in Goldsworthy's work and tried to hold myself to as high a standard. I also wanted people to wonder about the time it took for me to complete a piece.

For me, the most powerful element of Goldsworthy's work is the void. He describes it as, "an important element. Looking deep into a hole unnerves me. My concept of stability is questioned and I am made aware of the potent energies within the earth."<sup>2</sup> The void in my own work suggests the possibility of and the potential energy for growth. The opening of the seed suggests a future sprout emerging from the eventual splitting of the cleft. This process is temporarily frozen in its current state, lying dormant for an indeterminate amount of time.

Perhaps the reader now understands more about the artists that inspire me, and the resulting impact that has upon my work. In the following section, I will discuss each piece in my thesis exhibition in depth.

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction, Andy Goldsworthy: A Collaboration with Nature (New York: Harry N. Abrams Incorporated, 1990), iii.

<sup>2</sup> Andy Goldsworthy: A Collaboration with Nature (New York: Harry N. Abrams Incorporated, 1990), iii.



## Body Of Work

The work I made earlier in the year honored the physical characteristics of certain seeds by storing them in glass vessels that embody their tactility. The containers each serve as a shrine to their contents. The lids of the vessels echo the qualities of the seeds inside. They are fuzzy like milkweed, velvety like a beanpod, and waxy like the stem of a berry. They loosely function to preserve the seeds, but their main purpose is to draw the viewer in to examine the work more closely. With each piece, I tried to exaggerate the aspects of the particular seed that I found most beautiful, and point out that beauty to the viewer.

I collected my materials on walks during the fall, the season in which the life cycle of plants is coming to an end. Seeing myself as their protector, I would take them inside and stop time for them. I was particularly attracted to the visual and tactile softness of milkweed silk and sought to preserve that quality through its containment.

I sandblasted a small glass vessel and filled it with the fluffy seeds. The thickness of the glass and the sandblasted surface prevented a clear view of the milkweed, only giving a hint to its existence. The surface of the glass also reflected the iridescent quality of the seeds



*Untitled*

inside. Enjoying this effect, I repeated the process with a much larger and thinner walled vessel. The incredible amount of milkweed smashed against the surface of the container could be seen more clearly, creating a subtle pattern and enhancing the delicate softness of the form.

In the resulting piece, *Untitled*, I created a relationship between the large maternal form and the smaller less developed "child". The size and clarity of the larger form imply that it is the adult, and that there is potential for the smaller vessel to grow and develop into a similar state in the future. I used this metaphor to illustrate the process of growing up and the influence of parents upon a child.

I believe that we can benefit from the influence of children and their interactions with milkweed in nature. Children often notice and take pleasure in the airy fluff, trying to capture it with their hands. As adults we often forget that wonder, and I wanted to reintroduce people to what they found fascinating when they were young.

After working with the delicate milkweed, I wanted to use a heartier and more substantial seed. I thought about the way that milkweed seeds take to the air and became interested the opposite direction: the ground. Thousands of beanpods fallen from a Honey Locust tree lay on the



sidewalk outside my apartment, and I walked over them everyday while rushing to my car. I had never noticed the beauty of their curling form, or the shiny, wooden beans they protected. By slowing down and becoming more observant, I found my next seed.

I gathered as many pods as I could, and then opened them up. The seeds were difficult to get out, and the process left sticky residue and dirt all over my hands. Some pods had as many as twelve seeds, while others had only two or three. I developed a method to remove them faster and more easily, discovering that each compartment was connected and once one was opened, they all could come out.

The three brown vessels in *Essence of a Beanpod* are meant to illustrate the configuration of the beans within the pods. They sit in a row, as they did inside the protective casing and the woven lids join them together like the compartments the seeds occupied.

Each container has various amounts of beans, which are visible through the golden brown of the glass. Its hazy and slightly waxy look resembles the surface of the beans inside. The lids are velvety and slightly furry feeling, like the outside of their pods. Unlike the milkweed, the beans do not appear to have any desire to escape from their



*Essence of a Bean*

container. They settled at the bottom, content with their fate.

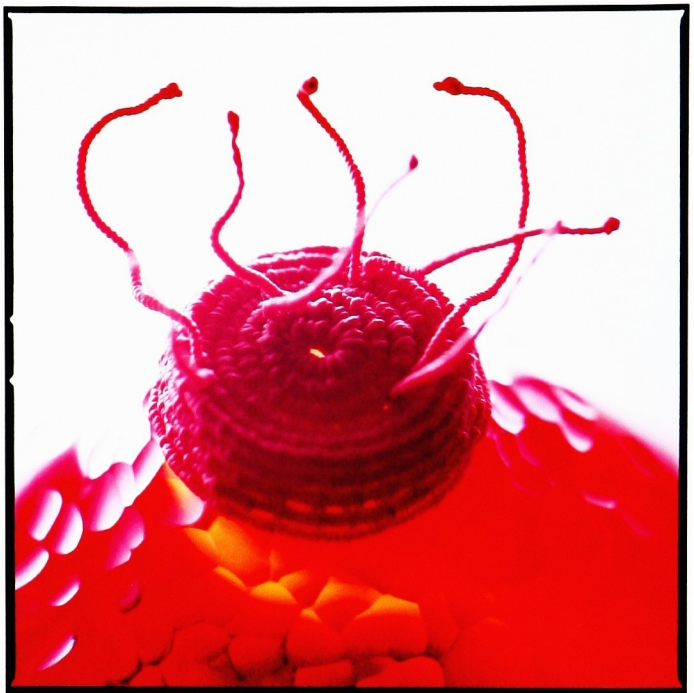
Both *Untitled* and *Essence of a Beanpod* use seeds that represent winter and fall. Their colors are also subdued like the landscape during their respective seasons. A few unusually warm days made me pine for spring and a tree caught my eye as I walked toward the woods. The bright red berries that hung in bunches seemed so juicy and alive compared to the drab, dying plants everywhere else. I selected them as a metaphor for vitality.

Unlike the previous two pieces, I left the glass polished and shiny. Around the lid I used the Italian coldworking technique, *batutto* to imitate the cluster of the berries on the tree. I wove the lid itself with red waxed floss, which simulated the texture of the stems, as well as the way they emanated off the branches.

Unfortunately, I failed to preserve the berries that inspired the piece. As a tribute, the vessel is filled with cranberries, an abundant winter berry. The piece was vibrant among my other earth-toned works and symbolized the existence of life, even during the death of winter.

After the fall quarter, I wanted to work with fiber on a larger scale. I was pleased with the interaction between the lids and the glass on the previous pieces and believed





*Essence of a Berry (detail)*



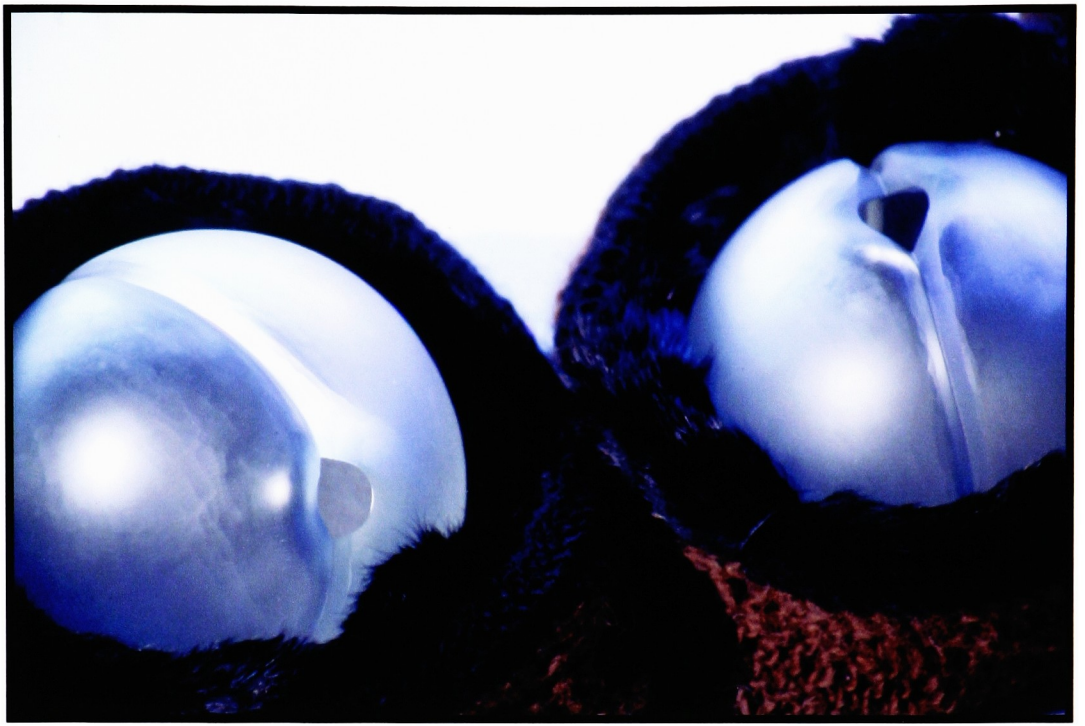
*Essence of a Berry*



I could push that further by working more sculpturally. The role of the textile changed into a large growing form, encompassing its precious contents. The precious contents are glass in the form of a seed, and the soft, unpolished surface gives it a ghostly quality. Contrasting materials to define inner and outer space replaced the monochromatic harmony evident in my prior work.

Still fascinated by pods and seeds, I crocheted a peapod out of thick brown wool. By now it was winter, and I imagined the pod warming and protecting the seeds like a giant sweater. Next, I lined the inside of the pod with black rabbit fur.\* The fur insulated the seeds and added to the nurturing feeling of the pod. The earthy colors represented the mood of the season and the form celebrated the elegance of symmetry.

The colorless glass seeds that I placed inside were ambiguous, not referring to a specific seed but representing all seeds. Ephemeral and pure like a gem cushioned in a velvet box, they sat snuggled and protected inside of their giant pod. I titled the piece *Emerge*, because there is a feeling that the peas are preparing to leave. The pod subtly stretches and pulls away from them, perhaps not fitting as tightly as it once had. The opening



*Emerge (detail)*



*Emerge*

of each pea faced a different way, suggesting the general direction of movement of each one.

My next piece, *Release*, expanded on the implied movement of *Emerge* and the seeds topple out of the pod. They have no say in their departure as they are birthed out of their warm cocoon, tumbling into the world. It is depicted as a somewhat tepid parent, shoving its naked children outside of their protective environment.

I crocheted the cocoon out of jute rope, which created a beautiful texture similar to burlap. I planned to line the inside with feathers; however, there was not enough contrast between the two materials. I solved the problem by crushing cockleburs, combining them with acrylic medium and painting this mixture onto the jute surface. The result was a dynamic interaction between the pure white feathers and crusty, spiky burs. The bristly outside provided the seeds with a protective barrier against predators and the elements. Also, by covering it with plants that had once lived, the pod itself seemed more alive.

For the seeds, spheres did not seem appropriate for this piece; I needed something to complement the long, conical form. I decided to combine the shape of a lemon

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\* I used fur recycled from a old coat I purchased at the Salvation Army.





*Release*



*Release (detail)*

and a pistachio to create unstable, roly-poly seeds. The hole moved to the tip of the seed, to reflect the opening of the pod. The clear, unpolished surface of the glass gives the seeds nestled in the feathers an egg-like appearance. It is difficult to tell how many seeds are inside the cocoon, but it is clear that the pod is in the process of releasing them.

After creating two pieces, in which the pods allowed or forced its precious contents to leave, I wondered if one would ever go against natural instinct and be unwilling to release its seeds. Intrigued by the idea of a plant with such emotions, I addressed the issue with my next work, *Clasp*.

I began by crocheting sisal rope, a stringy and rough natural fiber. The nature of the material causes it to fray and gives it a hair-like appearance. After completing the inner form, I dyed that section of the piece a steel gray. When I finished crocheting the entire piece, I dyed it again, this time diluting the dye and mixing in some green tones. The color is a green gray, like the bark of a maple tree. Wanting it to appear like it was still growing, I thought suspending it against a wall would convey this idea best. To give it support, I wove heavy steel wire throughout the interior and exterior of the





*Clasp*



*Clasp (detail)*

piece. The snakelike form suggests an iris or a pitcher plant, and is inspired by the kangaroo and her joey, or the oyster and the pearl. It is unusual, and if the viewer passes by without examining it closer, they miss its function.

I tested gallery etiquette by trying to lure the viewer into lifting the flap that protrudes towards her. I allowed a glimpse of luminescent nubs to peek out from under the flap, to give a clue that something is hiding there. If she takes the risk, she is rewarded with a silvery orb, nestled in a silken cobweb basket. If not, the secret of the seed's existence remains.

I used a single seed to convey the preciousness and uniqueness of a pearl. It seems so important that even the pod does not want to give it up and holds the seed tightly. It is shiny and new, hidden away and perhaps it will never be released.

## Conclusion



I believe that my thesis exhibition successfully communicates my interpretation of the beauty of nature and my desire to preserve that beauty. While the earlier work like *Untitled*, is meditative and tranquil, I think that *Emerge*, *Release*, and *Clasp* are more resolved in my purpose to convey comfort and protection. The interest people showed in my work pleased me, and many seemed to enjoy my use of milkweed and cockleburs. I feel that I achieved my goal to reintroduce people to what they ordinarily might have ignored before they saw my work. In the future, I intend to continue to work with natural materials and explore different forms of protection and containment.

## Processes

humanizes the creative process and gives the work additional meaning that I find lacking in machine made objects.

I created the woven lids in *Untitled, Essence of a Beanpod* and *Essence of a Berry*, using the basketry technique of winding fiber around an inner (often cotton) core. It is tedious, and it took many hours to complete one small lid. The result resembled hives or nests that complemented the glass vessels that they covered.

When I crocheted the larger sculptural pods, I made drawings that loosely resembled what I wanted the pod to look like. However, the shape often took on a life of its own, and I found myself constantly adjusting my vision of what it should be. I enjoyed that interaction with the material, and the resulting form felt more alive in the end, like it participated in its creation.

In my piece, *Emerge*, I chose heavy wool fiber still somewhat raw and unprocessed looking. I used single, double and triple crochet stitches to build up the form, without any wire supporting the structure. For the *Release* cocoon, I crocheted most of the shape with a single rib stitch, and then alternated between double, triple, and quadruple to complete opening and widen it. To keep mouth of the form from collapsing closed, I wove steel wire

through the final rows of stitches around the opening, before slipping the feathers into place. The acrylic medium also stiffened the jute rope, making it easier for it to maintain its basic shape.

Recognizing the essential role of the frame, as I crocheted *Clasp*, I left wider stitches in the areas I knew I would insert wire. Sisal rope is also very stiff, so it was necessary to soak the rope and soften it both before I began and while I crocheted. Again, I used primarily single and double stitches, alternating between the two as I found it necessary to make the form. With this piece, I had to add on certain parts and crochet them in seamlessly, so that the attached sections flowed into one another.

After I crocheted the interior part of the form and the pouch, I dyed it steel gray using black Pebeo brand silk and wool dye. After I finished the rest of the form, I dyed that with black Jacquard brand wool and silk dye. I diluted the second dye bath, and removed the piece from it sooner. The result was a faded, gray green exterior and a medium steel gray interior portion. This double dying process gave the piece depth and definition.

In conclusion, the time and energy of process for me are integral in my work. I enjoy the challenge of working with natural materials and the dimension they add when

combined with glass. There are infinite ways to use them to complement or contrast each other and that exciting aspect encourages me to continue my exploration.

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